

Concerto for the Left Hand

Maurice Ravel

Maurice Ravel was only seven years old when he was sent off to his first piano lessons, and five or six years after that he began producing his first compositions, which were scored (not surprisingly) for piano. He went on to gain admission to the preparatory piano classes of the Paris Conservatoire, and then entered the Conservatoire itself as a piano major. Despite his obvious capability as a pianist, he simply did not display the panache required of a top-flight concert artist around the turn of the 20th century. That became clear by 1895, at which point he was dismissed from the Conservatoire without having gained a single prize for his piano playing — this when anything less than a Premier Prix pretty much consigned a musician to a secondary sort of career.

Ravel, however, did not take this as much of a setback: by that time he had realized that his real gift lay not in piano performance but rather in composition. Already in the late 1890s he was creating piano works that are still performed today, such as his *Menuet antique* and *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, as well as his *Sites auriculaires* for piano duet, his Violin Sonata, and several finely crafted songs. He returned to the Conservatoire in 1897, and forever after cited his work there during the ensuing three years — with Gabriel Fauré in composition and André Gédalge in counterpoint — as critical to the development of his own musical lan-

guage. Again, however, no prizes were forthcoming from the Conservatoire in composition or fugue or anything else, and his five attempts at the Prix de Rome award (between 1900 and 1905) proved fruitless.

Ravel's output of piano music remained steady through 1920. Despite his limited success as a concert figure early on, he revved up his touring schedule in the 1920s and early 1930s. Between 1929 and 1931 Ravel composed both of his piano concertos, more or less simultaneously, interrupting work on his Concerto in G major (for Piano and Orchestra, 1929–31) to compose the Concerto in D major for Piano Left-Hand and Orchestra (1929–30; he titled it *Concerto pour la main gauche*, “Concerto for the Left Hand”).

At first glance it seems curious that Ravel waited so long to write a concerto for the instrument he had studied so assiduously. In fact, as early as 1906 he had apparently worked on a piano concerto on Basque themes, which he provisionally titled *Zazpiak-Bat*; some material from that aborted project eventually made its way into his G-major Piano Concerto.

Ravel wrote his Concerto for the Left Hand in response to a commission from Paul

In Short

Born: March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrénées, France

Died: December 28, 1937, in Paris

Work composed: 1929–30, on commission from Paul Wittgenstein, the work's dedicatee

World premiere: January 5, 1932, at Vienna's Grosser Musikvereinsaal, Robert Heger conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Paul Wittgenstein, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 17, 1938, John Barbirolli, conductor, Robert Casadesus, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 29, 2004, Lorin Maazel, conductor, Leon Fleisher, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 18 minutes



Angels and Muses

Many works featuring piano left-hand appeared in the years following World War I, thanks in large part to the Viennese pianist Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961), a brother of the famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. He had hardly embarked on his career as a concert pianist when he lost his right arm at the Russian front. To reestablish himself as a performer he commissioned left-hand works – mostly concertos or concerto-like pieces – from a lineup of luminary composers that included not only Ravel but also Prokofiev, Korngold, Hindemith, Britten, Franz Schmidt, and Richard Strauss.

It is a curious fact that Wittgenstein tended to commission works from composers whose styles he did not particularly like; he would then tangle with them after the pieces were delivered, sometimes even refusing to play the pieces they provided. Wittgenstein reported of Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand*, to which he retained exclusive performance rights for six years following its receipt: "I wasn't overwhelmed by the composition. It always takes me a while to grow into a difficult work. I suppose Ravel was disappointed, and I was sorry, but I had never learned to pretend." The two nearly came to legal blows, with Ravel demanding that Wittgenstein formally commit to playing the piece precisely as it was written – an indirect way of suggesting that the pianist was not up to its technical challenges.

The two smoothed things out enough to collaborate in several performances (Wittgenstein playing, Ravel conducting), one of which – on January 17, 1933, in the Salle Pleyel in Paris – was partially captured on film. The Ravel scholar Arbie Orenstein has ventured that "[Wittgenstein's] interpretation of the *Concerto* is not recommended as a model ... as the pianist takes liberties with the score, often giving the impression of playing his own arrangement of the work"

Wittgenstein, who was a generally obscure pianist until he lost his right arm in World War I, rehabilitated himself as a left-hand-only pianist, and commissioned new pieces that could spotlight his specialized talent. Piano music for the left hand alone was nothing new at the time, but most earlier left-hand music tended to have pedagogical overtones: even Brahms's masterful left-hand transcription of Bach's D-minor Violin Chaconne was published in a collection of Brahms's études.

Ravel's concerto does not in the least smack of the étude. It's an elegantly crafted, generally serious piece cast in a single movement made up of dramatically contrasting sections. Although Ravel once maintained that "the music of a concerto should, in my opinion, be lighthearted and brilliant, and not aim at profundity or at dramatic effects," he allowed that his *Concerto for the Left Hand* was "very different" from that. "It contains many jazz elements," he noted,

and the writing is not so light. In a work of this kind, it is essential to give the impression of a texture no thinner than that of a part written for both hands. For the same reason, I resorted to a style that is much nearer to that of the more solemn kind of traditional concerto.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, wood block, tam-tam, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.